

The Azhwars And Their Spiritual Legacy

The contribution made by the Azhwars of Tamil Nadu to Tamil heritage is quite unsurpassed. The term "ஆழ்வான்" ("Azhwan") means "ஆழ்ந்து கிடப்பவன்" ("one who delves deeply into a chosen field and remains deeply immersed in it"). "ஆழ்வார்" "Azhwar" is a term of respect. The Azhwars were a distinctive group of Tamil Vaishnava saints who delved deeply into the Divine through intense devotion or *Bhakti*. They experienced the Ultimate Reality in and through everything that they saw in the world of existence and poured their love and adoration for Him into beautiful poetry. The Reality that they experienced was not only transcendental but also all pervasive and immanent. Above all, the Reality was very Personal and represented Sriman Narayana ("*the support and the abode of hosts of souls*") with all auspicious and glorious attributes. The physical world is like the body of the Lord and the Lord is the life and soul of the physical world. The most important attribute of the Lord is His compassion, represented by "Sri" who eternally resides in His heart. Hence Narayana is known as Sriman Narayana. "Sri" is mother Lakshmi Who intercedes on behalf of the embodied souls and helps in their ultimate redemption. Surrendering to the Lord in utter devotion or Bhakthi is the simple means advocated by the Azhwars unlike other systems including the Vedic injunctions or practices. If the Reality is not only the ultimate cause of all physical forms in the cosmos but also the substratum of their very existence, then it must exist in and through all of them. In fact nothing could theoretically exist without the underlying Reality. Thus the Azhwars saw and felt Sriman Narayana in everything. They visualized Him in all His great *Avataaras* on this earth such as *Matsya, Koorma, Varaaha, Nrsimha, Vaamana, Rama, Krishna* and others, which He had taken from time to time for the sake of human redemption. Sriman Narayana not only was in their hearts but also in the skies, the rivers, the clouds, the mountains, the oceans, the lovely images in the temples ("*Archa Avataara*") and in short everywhere. Their poetic verses give true meaning to temple worship where the icon is but a symbol of the Lord but nevertheless imbued with the Lord like every atom of this physical universe.

The Azhwars' main contribution in the field of spirituality and religion and the history of Tamil literature, are the devotional Tamil poems on Sriman Narayana that they left behind; poems which are referred to as "*paasurams*," or 'verses.' Collectively, these *paasurams* constitute the Naalaayira *Divya Prabandham*, which amounts to 4000 verses. According to tradition, they

are equal to the Vedas, in both their revealed knowledge, and in their importance to religious life. Unlike the Vedas, which were in Sanskrit and could not be learnt by all and often restricted traditionally to some classes, the *Divya Prabandham* being in vernacular could be learned and recited by any one interested.

The Azhwars are twelve in number. They include: Poikai Piraan (பொய்கைபிரான்), BhudatAzhwar (பூதத்தாழ்வார்), PeyAzhwar (பேயாழ்வார்), ThirumazhisaiPiraan (திருமழிசைபிரான்), NammAzhwar (நம்மாழ்வார்), MadhurakaviAzhwar (மதுரகவிஆழ்வார்), PeriAzhwar (பெரியாழ்வார்), Godha (Andal)(ஸ்ரீ ஆண்டாள்), KulaShaekara Azhwar (குலசேகரஆழ்வார்), ThondaradippodiAzhwar (தொண்டரடிப்பொடிஆழ்வார்), Thiruppanaazhwar (திருப்பாணாழ்வார்) and Thirumangai Azhwar (திருமங்கைஆழ்வார்). Included by posterity in their company is the Sri Vaishnava Acharya, Ramanuja. Technically, the *Divya Prabandham* only has 3892 verses, if one omits the 108 benedictory verses on Sri Ramanuja.

The advent of the Azhwars is prophesied in the *Srimad Bhagavata Puraanam*, There it tells us that:

Especially in some parts of the Dravida [southern] regions of the country through which the Tamrabarani, Kritamala, Payaswini, the very holy Cauveri and the great west-flowing Mahanadi (Periyar) have their course, devotees of the Lord will specially abound. O King! Those who drink the waters of these rivers will become purified in mind and will generally develop devotion to Vasudeva, the worshipful Lord. (*Bhagavata Puraanam*, Sk XI-5- 39-40).

The Azhwars all hailed from the region in Tamil Nadu adjoining the rivers *Cauveri, Paalar and Tamrabarani*. They were all from different walks of life, different social strata, and different periods. Yet they were amazingly unified in their vibrant divine experiences and their philosophic views. They were revolutionaries of their times. They were above all caste distinctions: for them, being in the devotional service of the Divine alone mattered. Some believe that they appeared at a time when Hinduism was facing challenges from other religions such as Buddhism and Jainism and came out strongly against the blind Vedic rituals and deep sectarianism. The teachings of the Azhwars brought the true spiritual message of the Vedas and the Upanishads to the masses in their own vernacular and helped in some ways to reduce human exploitation.

Although the details of their life stories are somewhat limited, what we know of them is truly elevating to all spiritual aspirants. The origins of some of the Azhwars are attributed, in traditional account, to mystic births as incarnations of the Lord's divine ornaments and eternal attendants (*Nitya Suris*).

The first three of these great saint-sages, namely Sri Poikai Muni, Sri Bhudat Azhwar and Sri Pey Azhwar — called the Mudal (First) Azhwars, were contemporaries. (They are believed to have lived in the Dwaapara Age and were considered to have had mystic origins). Thirumazhisai Piraan is said to have been born of a sage. Kulashekara Azhwar and Thirumangai Azhwars were kings and hailed from the ruling class. Sri Peri Azhwar, Thondaradippodi Azhwar and Madhurakavi Azhwar were from Brahmin families. Sri Namm azhwar was born in a farmer's family and ThiruppaanAzhwar was from the Pana community considered at the time to be a low class outside the fold of the caste system. Sri Godha (Andal) was considered an incarnation of Bhu Devi (Mother Earth) and was found in the field by Sri Peri Azhwar much like Sri Seetha was discovered by King Janaka of the Rama *Avathaara* period.

The story that relates the origin of the *Naalaayira Divya Prabandham* takes us back in time to one dark stormy night when the three First Azhwars met in *Thirukkovaaloor*, in a small corridor at the threshold of a house. The presiding deity from *Thirukkovaaloor* temple, Lord Trivikrama, along with Sri Maha Lakshmi, eager to mingle with Their devotees, appeared amongst them although not revealing Their presence. However, the Azhwars felt Their presence as a sense of pressure in that small space. This led to the spontaneous outpouring of the three sweet and fragrant garlands of verses, each containing one hundred *paasurams* in the அந்தாதி (*andadhi*) style, each following the other, beginning with Sri Poikai Muni.

This story is referred to in Sri Poikai Azhwar's *Mudal Thiruvandadhi*:

நீயும் திருமகனும் நின்றாயால் .. காமர்பூங்கோவல்

இடைகழியே பற்றி யினி

(86)

Sri Poikai Azhwar glorifies the cosmic aspects of the Lord by starting with “வையம் தகளியா” — lighting a lamp with earth as the base, the surrounding oceans as the ghee and the burning Sun as the light. Sri Bhudat Azhwar follows with “அன்பே தகளியா” — lighting a lamp with devotion as the base, love as the oil, the sweet mind as the wick and the knowing Self as the

shining flame offering all of them to the Lord. When these two lamps were lit, the Lord could no longer hide His presence. Sri Pey Azhwar describes this in his முன்றாம் திருவந்தாதி (*Moondraam Thiruvandadhi*). His *paasuram* begins with “திருக்கண்டேன்,” which shows how the divine mother, Sri Maha Lakshmi, brings the grace of the Lord easily.

The story of how the diverse compositions of the individual Azhwars came to be put together as the *Naalaayira Divya Prabandham* by the great Acharyas is noteworthy. The various poetic works of the Azhwars would have been lost except for the efforts of Sri Nathamuni, a sage who was the grandfather of Sri Alavandar, the spiritual Acharya of Sri Ramanuja. Sri Nathamuni apparently heard the ten verses of திருவாய்மொழி (*Thiruvaimozhi*), one of the works of Sri Nammazhwar, which glorifies Sri Aara-amudan of *Thirukkudanthai*, being recited by some minstrels. This decad as all other decads in the series, ends with the words “ஆயிரத்துள் இப்பத்தும்”(“this ten verses amongst the thousand”). Hearing this, Sri Nathamuni enquired after the minstrels about the rest of the thousand verses. However they could not help him in his quest. Sri Nathamuni apparently sat in deep meditation invoking the blessings of Sri Nammazhwar himself. Pleased with his ardent prayers, Sri Nammazhwar apparently revealed not only his own works but also the works of all the other Azhwars.

The *Naalaayira Divya Prabandham* was thus passed down from Sri Nathamuni to his grandson, Sri Alavandar. While Sri Alavandar did not live long enough to directly supervise Sri Ramanuja’s initiation into the works of the Azhwars, Alavandar’s disciples did — disciples who eventually became Ramanuja’s followers. It was Sri Ramanuja, who popularized the poetry of the Azhwars by including them in Sri Vaishnava religious practice. Because of this succession of gurus — Namm azhwar, to Nathamuni, to Alavandar, to Ramanuja — we have the *Naalaayira Divya Prabandham* today.

Brief Outline of the Life Stories of the Azhwars:

Mudal Azhwars (முதல் ஆழ்வார்கள்)

No great detail is available about the individual life histories of the three First Azhwars except the incident that brings them all together at *Thirukkovaaloor*. A brief outline of what is recorded is as follows.

Sri Poikai Piraan (ஸ்ரீ பொய்கை பிரான்):

This Azhwar lived in the Dwaapara Age. He was the first of the Mudal Azhwars. He is said to have been born in a lotus flower in a pond (poikai) near திருவெஃகா (Thiruvekha) temple in Kanchipuram. He was the *amsa* (incarnation) of the *Pancha Janya* or the Conch of Sriman Narayana. His Avataara took place on திருவோணம் (Thiruvonam Nakshatram) in the month of ஜப்பசி (Ippasi) (Tula). His work முதல் திருவந்தாதி (Mudal Thiruvandadhi) is set in the *andadhi* style where the end word or the syllable of each verse becomes the beginning word of the succeeding verse. The end word of the hundredth verse becomes, in turn, the beginning of the first verse, making the hundred verses a true garland of verses. Azhwar sees the *Purushottama* (the Supreme Person) in the Lord of the seven hills.

உளன்கண்டாய் நன்னெஞ்சே உத்தமனென்றும்
உளன்கண்டாய் உள்ளுவாருள்ளத்துளன் கண்டாய்
வெள்ளத்தினுள்ளானும் வேங்கடத்துமேயானும்
உள்ளத்தினுள்ளான் என்றோர் 99.

"My good heart, The Supreme being is for ever with us. He resides for ever in the hearts of those who remember him. Know too, that He Who rests on the waves of the milk ocean and is present on the Venkata hill, is forever there in the inner recesses of your being".

Sri Bhudat Azhwar (ஸ்ரீ பூதத்தாழ்வார்):

He was the second of the Mudal Azhwars. His Avataara took place in திருக்கடல் மல்லை (Mahabalipuram), the day after that of Sri Poikai Azhwar namely on அவிட்டம் (Avittam Nakshatram) in the Tula month. He was considered as the *amsa* (incarnation) of the Mace or *Gada* of Vishnu, born in a blue lilly. The work of this Azhwar is இரண்டாம் திருவந்தாதி (Irandaam Thiruvandadhi) which is a poetic piece of high literary beauty and depth.

The Azhwar points to the grace of the Lord as the underlying cause of the entire spiritual process.

அருள் புரிந்த சிந்தை அடியார்மேல் வைத்து
பொருள் தெரிந்து காண்குற்ற வப்போது- இருள்திரிந்து

நோக்கினேன் நோக்கி நினைந்தேன் அதுஒண்கமலம்
ஓக்கினேன் என் னையும அங்கோர்ந்து. (59)

"When the Lord cast His benevolent glance at us, His devotees, showering on us the grace of constant remembrance, making some substance out of mere straw, my ignorance dispelled, I looked closely at the reality of God and Self, and meditated on His Feet resembling the lotus flower. I then offered my soul to those feet without a thought of any other recourse".

Sri Pey Azhwar (ஸ்ரீ பேயாழ்வார்):

He took his Avataara in Mylai (Mylapore) the day after Bhudat Azhwar on சதயம் (Sathaya Nakshatram) in the Tula month, as the *amsa* (incarnation) of the *Nandaka* or the Sword of the Lord Narayana, appearing in a red lilly flower in a large well of the Adhi Kaeshava Perumaal temple. This large well and a *nandavanam* (flower garden) are still to be found in the midst of the bustling modern Mylapore in Chennai. In his மூன்றாம் திருவந்தாதி (Moondraam Thiruvandadhi,) beginning with “திருக்கண்டேன் (Thirukkandaen)”, Sri Pey Azhwar establishes the *Sriya-patitvam* ("being the Lord of Sri") of Sriman Narayana and indicates clearly how Sri Mother Lakshmi intercedes on behalf of the individual souls or *jeevas*.

சார்வு நமக்கென்றும் சக்கரத்தான் தண்முழாய்த்
தார்வாழ் வரைமார்பன் தான்முயங்கும் - காரார்ந்த
வானமரு மின்னிமைக்கும் வண் தாமரை நெடுங்கண்
தேனமரும் பூமேல் திரு 100.

" The glorious mother Lakshmi is held close in His heart by the Lord Who wields the discus and Who has the chest wide as the mountain adorned by the cool Tulasi garland. She is like the permanent lightning streak in the dense dark clouds in the skies. She has long beautiful lotus eyes and is seated on the honey laden lotus flower. She is for ever our refuge".

Sri Thirumazhisai Piraan (ஸ்ரீ திருமழிசைபிரான்):

This Azhwar must have been a contemporary of the First Azhwars. There is good internal evidence of this from their *paasurams*. He hailed from திருமழிசை (Thirumazhisai) near Chennai. He was born in the pleasant month of தை (Thai) on the day of மகம் (Makham Nakshatram). He is

considered as the *amsa* (incarnation) of the *Sudarshana Chakra* (Discus) of Lord Narayana. He apparently was a great *Yogi* being born of a sage and took to the path of *Bhakti* in later years under the influence of Sri Pey Azhwar. His love of the Lord was so total and transparent that he was known as பக்திஸாரர் (*Bhaktisaara*), a title conferred on him by Lord Siva. The Lord even in His *archa* (temple stone idol) form had responded to his bidding. The famous incidence was in *Thiru Vekha* where the Lord came to be known as “*Yadhoktakaari*” “சொன்ன வண்ணம் செய்த பெருமாள்” since He acceded to Azhwar's request and left with the Azhwar and his disciple Kanikkannan who was banished from the kingdom. When the Lord returned at the behest of the Azhwar, He laid down in a direction opposite to the usual way on the Aadhi Saesha. — namely the head of the Lord is on our right, as we face Him. Even today, only in this shrine, the Lord reclines this way.

The Azhwar apparently spent many years in meditation at *Thirukkudanthai*. There is a shrine and a *nandavanam* there even today for the Azhwar. Only two of his great works are still available. One is திருச்சந்த விருத்தம் (*Thirucchanda Viruttam*), a beautiful rhythmic poem that is a lovely exposition of the Visishtadvaita philosophy. The second is நான்முகன் திருவந்தாதி (*Naanmukan Thiruvandadhi*), in which the Azhwar establishes the transcendental nature of Lord Narayana and indicates fully His *Nirhetuka Kripa* (unconditional compassion) for the *jeevas*.

This Azhwar's intense love of the Lord is discernible in his *paasurams*. His concern of the Lord touches one's heart.

நடந்தகால்கள்நொந்தவோ நடுங்கஞாலமேனமாய்
இடந்தமேய்குலுங்கவோ விலங்குமால்வரைச்சுரம்
கடந்தகால்பரந்த காவிரிக்கரைக்குடந்தையுள்
கிடந்தவாறெழுந்திருந்துபேசுவாழிகேசனே
61.(*Thirucchanda Viruttam*)

“*Did Thy feet which walked all over the forests (as Sri Rama) ache? Did Thy body feel exhausted having lifted the earth as the divine boar? O'Lord Kaeshava! Please get up and pray tell the reason why Thou repose in Thirukkudanthai on the banks of river Cauveri with wide torrential flow*

overcoming all obstructions caused by huge hills and forests. Let all be auspicious to Thee."

Azhwar indicates the reason why the Lord has taken abode in various holy shrines.

நாகத்தணைக்குடந்தை வெ.கா திருவெவ்வுள்
நாகத்தணை அரங்கம் பேரன்பில்- நாகத்
தணைப்பாற்கடல் கிடக்கும் ஆதிநெடுமால்
அணைப்பார்கருத்தனாவான்.

36. Naanmukan Thiruvandadhi

"On the serpent bed in Thirukkudanthai, ThiruVehka and Thiruvevvul, on the serpent again in Thiruvarangam, Thirupper, Thiruanbil and on AadhiSesha in the ocean of milk lies the ancient cause, the loving Lord with the sole intention to get into the minds of His devotees".

Clear spiritual knowledge bestowed by the grace of the Lord, allows a clear and proper understanding of the relationship of the *Paramaatma* and the *Jeeva*.. Azhwar expresses this in his own instance.

அன்பாவாய் ஆரமுதமாவாய் அடியேனுக்
கின்பாவாய் எல்லாமும் நீயாவாய்- பொன்பாவை
கேள்வா கிளரொளியென் கேசவனே கேடின்றி
ஆள்வாய்க்கடியேன் நானாள்.

59 (Naanmukan Thiruvandadhi)

You are Love sublime, the unsatiating nectar. You are my, your servant's Bliss and every kind of happiness. O' the Lord of Sri Lakshmi, whose halo adds lustre to Thee. O' my Lord Sri Kaeshava, I am your servant, thy eternal possession.

Sri NammAzhwar (ஸ்ரீ நம்மாழ்வார்):

This Azhwar was born in திருக்குருகூர் (Thirukkurugoor) called *Azhwar Thirunagari* in honour of the Azhwar, soon after Sri Krishna Avathaara was over. He was born on the auspicious Poornima day of the வைகாசி (Vaikhasi) month on விசாகம் (Vishakam Nakshatram). He was the

incarnation of Sri Vishvaksena, the commander-in-chief of the Lord's eternal attendants. He was unusual as a child not taking milk and not responding to people around him and, yet, he remained healthy looking. His parents, feeling of no use to their son, left him under a tamarind tree in the local ஆதிபிரான் (*AadiPiraan*) temple on the advice of the elders. He remained in meditation there for several years. Another *mahatma* மதுரகவி (Madhurakavi) by name, who was on a pilgrimage to the North, saw a bright light in the Southern direction and decided to trace it to its source. That bright light brought him ultimately to *Thirukkurugoor*. When he enquired the local people of the village, they led him to the young boy seated in meditation in the lotus position under the tamarind tree. Madhurakavi threw a small pebble to wake him up and posed a strange philosophic question to him.

"செத்ததின் வயிற்றில் சிறியது பிறந்தால் எத்தைத்தின்று எங்கே கிடக்கும்?" ("Sethathin Vayitiril, siriyaathu pirandhal etthai tindru enge kidakkum?") meaning if an individual soul takes birth in this lifeless material body, what will it eat and where will it exist? Sri Namm Azhwar replied as follows "அத்தைத்தின்று அங்கே கிடக்கும்" ("athai tindru ange kidakkum"), "it will eat that and live there" implying that if the self is a liberated soul it will live in the divine awareness drawing its subsistence from it, on the other hand if it is a karma bound soul, it will indulge in sense pleasures and live in the mundane world. Hearing this short but profound philosophic response, Sri Madhurakavi decided then and there that he had met his master and became Sri NammAzhwar's disciple.

It is said that Sri NammAzhwar lived for thirty two years. Four works of Sri Namm Azhwar are available, one is திருவிருத்தம் (*Thiruviruttam*) with 100 verses, the second is திருவாசிரியம் (*Thiruvaasiriyam*) with seven verses, the third is பெரிய திருவந்தாதி (*Periya Thiruvandadhi*) with 87 verses and the fourth is திருவாய்மொழி (*Thiruvaimozhi*) with 1102 verses. The latter is termed, "ஸ்ரீ பகவத் விஷயம்" (*Sri Bhagavat Vishayam*) and is considered equal to the *Sama Veda*. Several extensive commentaries have been written on this by Acharyas who came after Sri Ramanuja.. Sri NammAzhwar himself is called "வேதம் தமிழ் செய்த மாறன்"(literally "*Maaran* who did Veda in Tamil", Maaran being another name of Nammazhwar)

One can feel the Azhwar's *anubhava* (experience) of the Lord through his *paasurams*. It is said that the Lord from all of the *divya deshas* (holy shrines) along with mother Lakshmi appeared before the Azhwar to hear his

paasurams. The Azhwar himself lived in divine consciousness. NammAzhwar says “உண்ணும் சோறு பருகு நீர் திண்ணும் வெற்றிலை எல்லாம் கண்ணன்” — that the Lord sang on Himself through him “தம்மைக் கொண்டு தன்னைப் பாடினன்”.

உயர்வற உயர்நலம் உடையவன் யவனவன்

மயர்வற மதிநலம் அருளினன் யவனவன்

அயர்வறும் அமரர்கள் அதிபதி யவனவன்

துயரறு சுடரடி தொழுதெழென் மனனே

1-1-1. *Thiruvaimozhi*

"Who is He who possesses the highest good

Who is He, who graces clear knowledge and devotion dispelling ignorance

Who is He, who is the Lord of the ever wakeful eternal stars

O' my mind ! rise and worship His holy feet that destroy all sorrow"

மனனக மலமற மலர்மிர்சை எழுதரும்

மனன் உணர் வளவிலன் பொறியுணர் வவையிளன்

இனன் உணர் முழுநலம் எதிர்நிகழ் கழிவினும்

இனன் இவன் எனனுயிர் மிகுநரை இலனே

1-1-2. *Thiruvaimozhi*

" He is beyond the grasp of even the pure mind freed of the fetters of passion and anger in which blossoms the Yogic knowledge. He is beyond the knowledge derived from the senses. He is the form of pure knowledge and bliss. He has none equal or superior in the future, the present or the past. He is my life".

திடவிசும்பு எரிவளி நீர்நிலம் இவைமிசை

படர்பொருள் முழுவதுமாய் அவை யவைதொறும்

உடல்மிசை உயிரெனக் கரந்தெங்கும் பரந்துளன்

சுடர்மிகு சுருதியுள் இவையுண்ட சுரனே

1-1-7. *Thiruvaimozhi*

"He is in the wide space, the fire, the wind, the water and the earth and in all of the things formed by them. The Lord, Who swallowed the Universe and is the substance of the splendid Sruiti, pervades all of the manifest Universe like the soul in the body".

கண்ணன் கழலிணை நண்ணும் மனமுடையீர்

எண்ணும் திருநாமம் திண்ணம் நாரணமே.

10-5-1.

Thiruvaimozhi

"O' all of you who desire to reach the holy feet of Krishna
You need to think of his sacred name. "Narayana" is the mantra".

நாரணன் எம்மான் பார் அணங்காளன்
வாரணம் தொலைத்த காரணன் தானே.

10-5-2.

Thiruvaimozhi

"Narayana is my Lord. He is the consort of the divine mother Earth.
He is the Cause of all. He is the same Krishna who destroyed the mad
elephant"

அமரர்க் கரியானை தமர்கட் கெளரியானை
அமரத்தொழுவார்கட்கு அமராவினைகளே.

10-5-9.

Thiruvaimozhi

" He is unreachable even to the devas. He is however accessible to His
devotees.
The effects of *karma* will never accrue to those who worship Him without
other desires."

His *paasuram*, which expresses his surrender at the holy feet of the Lord in
Thiruvenkatam, is often recited in the temples at the end of evening
Aaraadhana. In this verse, the Azhwar surrenders to the Lord by invoking
first Sri Maha Lakshmi Who resides eternally in His heart, for She acts in
favour of all the souls always and with Her on our side, all our faults will be
overlooked by the Lord.

“அகலகில்லேன் இறையுமென்று அலர்மேல் மங்கை உறை மார்பா
நிகரில் புகழாய் உலகம் முன்றுடையாய் என்னை ஆள்வானே
நிகரிலமரர் முனிக்கணங்கள் வணங்கும் திருவேங்கடத்தானே
புகலின்றடியேன் உன்னடிகீழ்மர்ந்து புகுந்தேனே”

6-10-10.

Thiruvaimozhi

"O' Lord on Whose heart resides the divine lady of the lotus flower saying
that she can never stay away from Thee even for a moment. O' Lord of
matchless glory, owner of all the three worlds, my ruler ! O' Lord of
Thiruvenkatam, worshiped by peerless immortal devas and hosts of sages! I,

Thy servant, without any other shelter, sat at Thy feet and sought Thee as refuge".

Sri NammAzhwar thus leads all of us by showing us how to do *prapatthi* (complete and absolute surrender) and therefore he is said to be at the summit of those who surrender to the Lord (ப்ரபந்நஜநகூடஸ்த, “*Prapannajana Kootastha*”). It was Sri NammAzhwar who bestowed the *Naalaayiram* to Sri Nathamuni.(நாதனுக்கு நாலாயிரம் உரைத்தபிரான்).

Sri Madhurakavi Azhwar (ஸ்ரீ மதுரகவி ஆழ்வார்):

Sri Madhurakavi Azhwar was born on சித்திரை (*Chitra Nakshatram*) in the month of சித்திரை (Chitthirai). He was born in *Thirukkolur* as the *amsa* (incarnation) of Sri Garuda; Vishnu’s vehicle. His story is intertwined with that of Sri NammAzhwar. His work consisted of only ten verses called “கண்ணிருண் சிறுத்தாம்பு” (*Kanninun Chirutthaambu*) all on குருகைபிரான் (*Kurukaipiraan*) which is another name of Sri NammAzhwar since he hailed from *Thirukkurugoor*. Sri Madhurakavi who was a sage himself was attracted to the holy feet of Sri NammAzhwar by the latter's immeasurable depth of love of the Lord. He became Sri NammAzhwar's disciple and considered him as the Lord Himself. “தேவு மற்றறியேன்” he says in *Kanninun Chirutthaambu*. It is a beautiful piece of *guru bhakti*.

Sri Peri Azhwar (ஸ்ரீ பெரியாழ்வார்):

He was born in ஸ்ரீவில்லிப்பத்தூர் (*Sri Villiputthoor*) on ஸ்வாதி (*Swathi Nakshatram*) in the month of ஆனி(Aani). He was known as Vishnu Chittar. He was considered the *amsa* of the Lord's chariot. He had a special honour of being the father of Sri Godha whom he found as a child in his Tulasi garden. He used to do flower garland service to the Lord வடபத்ரஸாயி (*Vatpatra Saayi*) in *Sri Villiputthoor*. Since Andal eventually was wedded to Lord Sri Ranganatha, Sri Peri Azhwar becomes in a sense the father-in-law of the Lord. The Azhwar's love of the Lord is like that of mother Yashoda's love of the child Sri Krishna. In fact many of the Azhwar's *pasurams* convey the mother's வாத்தஸல்ய (*Vatsalya*) feeling towards the Lord. நீராட்டம் (*Neeraattam*) beginning with வெண்ணெயளைந்த (*Vennaianda*) that is recited during the Lord's *Thirumanjanam* is one

example of this. In addition, The Azhwar had sung the famous benedictory *paasuram* of திருப்பல்லாண்டு (*Thiruppallaandu*) on the Lord Himself when He appeared to him mounted on Garuda. It is for these reasons he is called பெரியாழ்வார் (or “Big-Azhwar”) and *Thiruppallaandu* has been made the beginning of the *Naalaayiram* by the Acharyas.

Sri Godha (Sri Andal) (ஸ்ரீ ஆண்டாள்):

The story of Andal is relatively well known. She was like mother Seetha born of Mother Earth. She appeared as a child in the Tulasi garden of Sri Peri Azhwar on பூரம் (*Pooram-Nakshatram*) day in the ஆடி (*Aadi*) month. திருவாடிப் பூரம் (*Thiru Aadi Pooram*) is a very well known day to many. She was raised by Sri Peri Azhwar with special love and care. Her devotion to the Lord grew enormously. She ultimately became the epitome of *Bhakti* for the Lord, giving her total self to Him. Her wishes to become the bride of the Lord eventually materialized with Lord Sri Ranganatha Himself instructing the authorities of the temple to bring her fully decorated as a bride to His sanctum. Finally Sri Godha merged completely with the Lord in the sanctum in Srirangam. Sri Godha's நாச்சியார் திருமொழி (*Naachiyaar Thirumozhi*) and திருப்பாவை (*Thiruppavai*) are very famous among the *Divya Prabandha Paasurams*.

In *Thiruppavai*, Sri Andal assures us of the Lord's grace (“நாராயணனே நமக்கே பறை தருவான்”) and shows us all how to surrender to the Lord.

“எற்றைக்கும் ஏழேழு பிறவிக்கும் உந்தன்னோடு உற்றோமேயாவோம் உனக்கே நாமாட்செய்வோம் மற்றை நம் காமங்கள் மாற்று”.

("O'Lord Govinda. Please change all our other desires so that we will be of Thee and serve Thee alone even if we were to be born seven and seven times over.")

Sri Kula Shaekara Azhwar (ஸ்ரீ குலசேகர ஆழ்வார்):

This Azhwar was a Chera king born on the புனர்பூசம் (*Punarvasu Nakshatram*) day in month of மாசி (*Masi*). He was the *amsa* (incarnation) of *Kaustuba* or the Gem of the Lord. He was a great Sri Rama *Bhakta*. His *paasurams* form the பெருமாள் திருமொழி (*Perumaal Thirumozhi*). Even in

his *paasurams* on the Lord of திருக்கண்ணபுரம் (*Thirukkannapuram*), his bhakti towards Lord Sri Rama is evident as his *paasurams* on this shrine starts with “மன்னுபுகழ் கோசலைதன்மணிவயிறு வாய்த்தவனே.” referring the Lord as the precious son of the famous *Kausalya*. In தில்லை நகர் (*Thillainagar-Chidambaram*), the Azhwar visualizes Sri Rama to be reclining as *Sri Govinda Raja Perumaal* along with *Maaruthi* who is considered an *amsa* (incarnation) of Lord Siva. In the last ten verses of பெருமாள் திருமொழி (*Perumaal Thirumozhi*), the Azhwar describes the entire Ramayanam beautifully. In his verses on Lord Srinivasa of *Thiruvenkatam*, he craves to be born in the *Thiruvenkata* hills just to have constant joy of being with the Lord of *Thiruvenkatam*. He says that he would be happy to be born as an insentient entity like a door step at the entrance of the Lord's sanctum. (“படியாய்க் கிடந்து உன் பவளவாய் காண்பேனே”). To honour the desire of the Azhwar, in *Thiruppathi*, the door step at the inner sanctum of the Lord is called “குலசேகரப்படி” (“*Kulashaekara*” door step”)

Sri Thondaradippodi Azhwar (ஸ்ரீ தொண்டரடிப்பொடி ஆழ்வார்):

He was born in திருமண்டங்குடி (*Thirumandangudi*), as the *amsa* (incarnation) of the Lord's Ornament *Vaijyanthi* on the auspicious கேட்டை (*Khettai Nakshtram*) day in the month of மார்கழி (*Marghazhi*). He was called *Vipra Narayana*. His story is most human and depicts how he is transformed into a great *bhakta* of Lord Sri Ranganatha by the intercession of the Lord freeing him from the grips of human frailties. He renamed himself as “தொண்டரடிப்பொடி,” which means, “dust at the feet of the devotees of the Lord.” All his life, he served Lord Sri Ranganatha making flower garlands and maintaining a *nandavanam* (flower garden) on the banks of Cauveri. Both his works are on Lord Sri Ranganatha. One is திருப்பள்ளியெழுச்சி (*Thiruppalli Yezhucchi*) which is to wake the Lord like in *Suprabhatam* and the other is a beautiful sweet garland of 45 verses called திருமாலை (*Thirumaalai*) all on Sri Ranganatha. To read, listen or to recite these verses will move one to tears and enrich the love of the Lord. The often quoted and famous verse which most may be familiar with is

பச்சை மாமலைபோல் மேனி பவளவாய் கமலச்செங்கண்
 அச்சுதா அமரரேறே ஆயர்தம் கொழுந்தே எண்ணும்
 இச்சுவைத் தவிர யான்போய் இந்திரலோகம் ஆளும்

அச்சுவைப்பெறினும் வேண்டேன் அரங்கமாநகருள்ளானே 2. *Thirumaalai*

O Lord of holy Srirangam. I prefer the delight of uttering your holy name, calling you -- "O Achuta, with the form resembling the great green mountain, with lotus eyes and coral like lips; Lord of the eternal attendants and the gem of the cowherds." to any pleasures of the world of Indra even if it were conferred upon me.

Sri ThiruppaanAzhwar (ஸ்ரீ திருப்பாணாழ்வார்):

Sri ThiruppaanAzhwar was born in உறையூர் (*Uraiyur*), a village near *Srirangam* as the *amsa* (incarnation) of *Srivatsa* mark on the chest of the Lord on ரோகிணி(*Rohini Nakshatram*) in the month of கார்த்திகை (*Karthigai*). He took birth among the பாணர் (*Pana*) community considered to be of low class who were not allowed to mingle with the so-called high-class people of the town. The Azhwar however, from his very early childhood spent all his waking moments in singing the glory of the Lord Sri Ranganatha with his lute in his hands, standing near the banks of the Cauveri River. One day while singing, he was deeply immersed in divine thoughts and was totally oblivious of the external world. At that time, the high priest Loka Saranga Muni from the temple of Sri Ranganatha came to fetch water from the river Cauveri for the Lord's *thirumanjanam*. Finding the Azhwar to be in his path and not moving away despite his calls, the high priest of the temple threw a pebble at the Azhwar. Although the Azhwar was awakened in this rude manner, he apologized to the priest and moved away from the area. However, when the priest returned to the sanctum, he felt that the Lord appeared as though he was bleeding from his forehead. That night, the Lord appeared in his dream and told him of how he badly mistreated His most favourite devotee near the Cauveri River. He further commanded the high priest to bring the Azhwar to His sanctum with full temple honours the very next day. Thus at the behest of the Lord, Azhwar was brought to the sanctum of Lord Sri Ranganatha with all the temple honours and literally carried on the shoulders by Loka Saranga Muni. This led the Azhwar to divine ecstasy which bloomed in the form of the அமலனாதிபிரான் (*Amalanaadipiraan*). The Azhwar himself completely merged with Lord Sri Ranganatha along with his mortal coils.

In the ten verses of *Amalanaadipiraan*, the Azhwar describes the divine bliss arising from seeing the Lord from His holy feet to the crown. Thiru Paana Azhwar gets overwhelmed and immersed in the beauty of the Lord reclining on the serpent in *Srirangam*, Who at the time of deluge protects all life forms from extinction by swallowing the seven worlds as a child lying on the banyan leaf.

“ஆலமாமரத்தினிலைமேல் ஒரு பாலகனாய்
ஞாலமேழுமுண்டான் அரங்கத்தரவணையான்”

Furthermore, the Azhwar did not want to see anything else with the eyes that had seen his sweet Lord.

“என்னமுதனைக் கண்டகண்கள்
மற்றொன்றினைக் காணாவே.”

The work is short but has great philosophic import. It inspired three acharyas to write commentaries on.

Sri Thirumangai Azhwar(ஸ்ரீ திருமங்கை ஆழ்வார்):

Sri Thirumangai Azhwar was the youngest and the last of the Azhwars. He was born on கார்த்திகை (*Kritthikai Nakshatram*) in the month of கார்த்திகை (*Karthikai*), in *Thirukkurayalur* in திருவாலி நாடு (*Thiruvalinadu*). He was considered the *amsa* (incarnation) of the divine bow *Sarngam* of the Lord. He became a chieftain of the Chola king even when he was young. He was known by a variety of names including *Parakaalan*, *Kaliyan*, *Mangaiyarkone*, His call to spiritual journey and superior bhakti came when he married the divine and most beautiful குமதவல்லி நாச்சியார் (*Kumudavalli Naachiyaar*). She set two conditions for him before she would marry him. One was for him to embrace Sri Vaishnavism by taking proper instruction from an acharya and the second was to serve 1008 *bhagavataas* (devotees) with a grand meal daily for one year. His ardent desire to keep his promise to his wife made him spend beyond his means. He had difficulties meeting the required collections of taxes for the chola king. The latter made him a captive by force. He was vexed and upset with the Lord for not showing him the way. Due to Lord's love of the Azhwar, He revealed the location of a hidden treasure in *Kanchipuram* in his dreams, with which the Azhwar could compensate the King and continue feeding the *bhagavataas*. The Azhwar followed the lead and retrieved the treasure which made him meet his obligations for a while.

Eventually however the funds ran out. He then with a few of his friends, decided to rob the rich to keep up the feeding of the *bhagavataas*. The Lord's direct grace came to the Azhwar during one of those occasions when he waited to waylay some rich couple travelling through the woods in the night. The Lord Himself along with Sri Maha Lakshmi came in the form of a newly wed rich couple. The Azhwar got the bridegroom to bundle up all the jewels and part with them by mere show of his sword. But the bundle was too heavy for The Azhwar to carry. The Azhwar felt that the bridegroom had put some kind of a “*mantric*” spell on him. He forced Him to reveal the “*mantra*”. Following this, the Lord imparted the *Ashta akshara* mantra to the Azhwar. This immediately transformed the Azhwar completely. The Azhwar refers to this in the 5th verse of the first decad in பெரிய திருமொழி (*Periya Thirumozhi*) and mentions how effortlessly he obtained the grace of the Lord (கள்வனேன் ஆனேன் சிக்கெனத் திருவருள் பெற்றேன்).

The Lord revealed Himself to the Azhwar and commanded him to visit all His திவ்ய தேசம் (*divya deshas* or holy shrines). Sri Thirumangai Azhwar in fact visited many *divya deshas*; some, difficult to reach even today, such as *Naimisharanyam, Bhadrinath and Ahobilam*. Thus the Azhwar utters his benediction (மங்கலாஸானம்) on these shrines. Thus all the *divya deshas* sung by the various Azhwars, came to take on a special meaning for the discerning devotees.

Sri Thirumangai Azhwar was a very talented poet and he had a large share of verses in the *Naalaayiram*, with a variety of intricate poetry. One such work is திருவெழுக்கூற்றிருக்கை (*Thiruvezhuk Kootrirukkai*). The other five works are பெரிய திருமொழி (*Periya Thirumozhi*) with 1084 verses, திருக்குறுந்தாண்டகம் (*Thirukkurun Thandakam*) திருநெடுந்தாண்டகம் (*Thiru Nedun Thandakam*), சிறிய திருமடல் (*Siriya Thirumadal*) and பெரிய திருமடல் (*Periya Thirumadal*). திருஞான ஸம்பந்தர் (*Thirujnana Sambandhar*), the *Saivite Naayanaar* saint was a contemporary of the Azhwar and the Azhwar's poetic skills were challenged by him when he visited *Sirghazhi*. The Azhwar sang ten verses on *Sirghazhi Sri Ramar* (*Periya Thirumozhi* III-4) and won the admiration of *Sambandhar* who presented him with his trident acknowledging the Azhwar to be a நாலுகவிப்பெருமாள் (*Nalu-kavipperumaal*). This is the reason why Thirumangai Azhwar in the temples has a trident (வேல்) in his hands.

The first ten *paasurams* of *Periya Thirumozhi* beginning with “வாடினேன் வாடிவருந்தினேன் மனத்தால்” are very beautiful. In these verses, the Azhwar feels elated about his own blessing of receiving Sriman Narayana *mantra*. He points out all its benefits, how it will remove all our woes and bring us “bliss divine” even in this world. He entreats all to chant the Narayana Namam.

துஞ்சுபோதழைமின் துயர்வரில்நினைமின்
துயரிலீர் சொல்லிலும் நன்றாம்
நஞ்சுதான் கண்டீர் நம்முடைவினைக்கு
நாராயணாவென்னும் நாமம்.

"Call Narayana's name at the time when life begins to fade. Think of Narayana's name when in distress, it is good to say even when there is none. Lo and behold! it is Medicine for all our ills".

Sri Ramanuja (ஸ்ரீ இராமாநுஜர்):

Sri Ramanuja was born in ஸ்ரீபெரும்புதூர் (*Sri Perumbudur*) near Chennai on திருவாதிரை (*Thiruvaadirai Nakshatram*) in the month of சித்திரை (*Chitthirai*) to a Vedic Brahmana by name *Aasuri Kaesava* and his wife *Kantimati* by the blessings of the Lord Sri Parthasarathi of *Thiruvallikaeni* in answer to their sincere devotional prayers. Sri Ramanuja lived a long life of 120 years between 1017 to 1137 A.D, according to traditional accounts. Although he took early Vedic teachings under the guidance of one Yadavaprakaasa, he had his differences with the latter's philosophy. The teacher felt threatened by the deep intellect of the astute student and plotted to kill him during a pilgrimage to the North. Sri Ramanuja was alerted to this when they were half way up the journey. He managed to escape undetected. On the way back while he was lost in the woods in the dark night he was aided by a hunter couple who showed him the way and personally escorted him back to *Kanchipuram*. The next dawn he found himself in the outskirts of *Kanchipuram* near *Sri Varadaraja's* temple and the strange couple that helped him through the dark night were no longer to be seen. When his teacher returned from his pilgrimage, he was surprised to find Sri Ramanuja again attending his classes.

After a while, Sri Ramanuja sought the advice of one Thirukkacchi Nambi also known as Kanchi Purna, whom Sri Ramanuja admired and respected for

his deep devotion to the Lord. On the latter's advise, Sri Ramanuja began doing service to *Sri Varadaraja* by drawing water from the well and bringing it up for the Lord's *Thirumanjanam*. Yamunaacharya, also known as Sri Alavandar of *Srirangam*, the grandson of Sri Nathamuni (the editor of the *Prabhandam*) came to hear about the intellect and deep devotion of Sri Ramanuja and sought Sri Ramanuja out to take on the leadership role of the Sri Vaishnavas after him in *Srirangam*. However, Sri Alavandar passed away before this would materialize.

The spiritual earning of Sri Ramanuja was growing more intensely at this time and he was paying less attention to worldly matters. He wanted Kanchi Purna to become his spiritual acharya. Kanchi Purna declined to accede to his request in all his humility saying that he was born of a lower class unlike Sri Ramanuja. Sri Ramanuja was however above all petty differences based on caste and for him what counted was devotion to the Lord. But through Thirukkacchi Nambi who had direct abilities to communicate with Lord *Sri Varadaraja* because of his *bhakti*, he learnt that the Lord wanted him to be initiated by Sri Periya Nambi also known as Maha Purna, another disciple of Sri Yamunaacharya.

While Sri Ramanuja was on his way to meet Periya Nambi, the latter was also on his way from *Srirangam* to meet Sri Ramanuja to try and convince him to take on the leadership of his devotees there. They both met at *Madhurantakam* where Sri Ramanuja got initiated into the Sri Vaishnava's fold by Sri Periya Nambi. He came to learn all about the Azhwars' works through Sri Periya Nambi. However this period was abruptly ended since the wife of Sri Ramanuja who had high caste mentality, verbally abused Sri Periya Nambi's wife on a petty matter. She also blamed Sri Ramanuja for her lot in life, whereby having wedded to him she had lost all "her high caste dignity and customs". Sri Ramanuja felt distressed having caused insult to his guru and his wife, who both left Kanchipuram quite abruptly. He resolved to leave the life of a householder. When his wife had returned to her parents' home, he took to *Sannyaasa* with Lord *Varadaraja* as guru through Kanchi Purna. The Lord gave him the name *Yatiraja*.

For a while Sri Ramanuja set up a small monastery in *Kanchipuram* and lived there teaching Vedanta. It was at this time strangely enough that his old teacher Yadava, disenchanted and regretting his own old ways, became a disciple of Sri Ramanuja. Subsequently, at the earnest request of the devotees in *Srirangam*, Sri Ramanuja returned to *Srirangam*. After learning many Sri Vaishnava texts, he sought to learn the true import of the

ரஹஸ்யத்ரய (Rahasyatraya or three secrets) from Sri Thirukkotiyyur Nambi who was the exponent at the time and who was also a former disciple of Yamunaacharya. Apparently Sri Ramanuja had to visit him eighteen times before the latter would instruct him about the true import of the three "mantras". Despite the fact that his acharya had placed an injunction against him from revealing the secret meaning to others, the very first act of the broad minded Ramanuja, was to get on top of the temple tower there and announce to everyone about the *mantras* and their secret meaning. When reprimanded by his acharya, Ramanuja told him that he would be more than happy to suffer all the consequences of his action since all others would derive benefit and reach the Lord.

Sri Ramanuja became particularly inspired by Sri NammAzhwar's *Thiruvaimozhi*. The philosophic truths expressed by the Azhwars in their *paasurams* became the basis of the philosophy of Visishtadvaita (qualified non-dualism) advanced by Sri Ramanuja. His *Bhashya* (commentary) of the Vedanta Sutras of Sage Vyaasa came to be known as ஸ்ரீ பாஷ்யம் (*Sri_Bhashya*). Sri Ramanuja popularized the poetic verses of the Azhwars amongst his followers.. He himself was very fond of *Thiruppavai* and was called *Thiruppavai jeer*. He encouraged his disciples to write commentaries on *Thiruvaimozhi*. He also instituted the recitation of *Divya Prabandham* in the temples during regular daily worship as well as during *Utsava* times. In addition special, *Adhyayana Utsavams* were held on yearly basis for recitation of the *Prabandhams* and the Vedas giving both an equal status. Thus in Sri Vaishnava tradition, all teachers came to take the divine works (*Divya Sookties*) of the Azhwars as *pramaanam* (means of valid knowledge) like the Vedas and the Upanishads.

When Sri Ramnuja came to settle in *Srirangam*, Periya Koil Nambi was in charge of *Srirangam* temple. Eventually he handed over the temple to Sri Ramanuja's hands and became an ardent devotee of Sri Ramanuja himself. He was given a special name by Sri Ramanuja and was called *Amudanar* because of the sweet way in which he used to recite the *Prabandham*. He wrote a hundred and eight verses in praise of Sri Ramanuja and the Azhwars. This is called இராமாநுச நூற்றந்தாதி (*Ramanujan Nootrandadhi*). These verses have also been made as part of the *Divya Prabandham* bringing the total verses to four thousand by the Acharyas that came after Sri Ramanuja.

To honour Sri Ramanuja, the benedictory verse on the Azhwars usually chanted before recitation of the *Prabandham* includes Sri Ramanuja (Yateendra) along with all the Azhwars.

பூதம் ஸரச்ச மஹதாஹ்வய- பட்டநாத
ஸ்ரீ பக்திஸார- குலசேகர-யோஹிவாஹாந்
பக்தாங்க்ரிரேணு-பரகால-யதீந்த்ர மிஸ்ராந்
ஸ்ரீமத் பராங்குச முநிம் ப்ரணதோஸ்மி நித்யம்

“I bow daily to the holy feet of Bhuta (Bhudat Azhwar), Saras (Poikai Piraan), Mahadavya (Pey Azhwar), Bhattanada (Peri Azhwar), Sri Bhaktisaara (Thirumazhisai Piraan), Kulashaekara (Kulashaekara Azhwar), one who rode on the shoulders of Muni (ThiruppaanAzhwar), Bhaktaangrirenu (Thondaradippodi Azhwar), Parakaala (Thirumangai Azhwar), Yateendra (Sri Ramanuja) and Srimad Parankusa Muni (Madhurakavi Azhwar and Sri NammAzhwar)”.

Sri Ramanuja is known and respected for his philosophical work even among the Western scholars. Karl Potter who is the chief editor of the massive *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies* project writes as follows about Sri Ramanuja and the Visishtadvaita philosophy.

Ramanuja, we have seen, elevates God to the supreme position in his ontology and elevates *bhakti* to the supreme position among the paths. In the last analysis, it is God's grace alone that can obtain freedom for us. Then what is the function of philosophy? Apparently Ramanuja takes philosophy to be not the resolver of doubts, but rather the path of knowledge itself. This implies that doubts are to be encouraged, as they lead one to embark upon the path of knowledge.... Visistadvaita grows into a fervently devotional religion, and in Srivaisnavism of the present day, an exceedingly influential sect in parts of the South, Rumanuja's personality and organization of ritual comes to be seen as more important than his philosophical writings. With its emphasis on *bhakti* and *prapatti*, this development of Ramanuja's tradition can be said to represent one of the main arteries through which philosophy reached down to the masses, and it may be that Visistadvaita is today the most powerful philosophy in India in terms of numbers of adherents, whether they know themselves by that label or not. Visishtadvaita is

not, however, the philosophy which the West associates with India, nor is it the avowed position of the large proportion of nineteenth-and twentieth-century professional philosophers in Indian universities. (Potter, Karl, 1963: *Presuppositions of India's Philosophies*. Englewood Cliffs N.J.: Prentice Hall, pp.252–253).

The Philosophic message of the Divya Prabandham of the Azhwars:

Sri Venkatanatha (Swami Desikan), the great acharya and a renowned scholar of the 13th century A.D, in *Sri Guruparamparaa Saaram* states that the garlands of verses in Tamil by the Azhwars make us understand the difficult and often hidden meanings of the Vedas and the Upanishads.

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செய்ய தமிழ் மாலைகள் நாம் தெளிய வோதித்
தெளியாத மறைநிலங்கள் தெளிகின்றோமே.”

The philosophic hymns of the Azhwars (நாலாயிர திவ்ய பிரபந்தம், *Naalaayira Divya Prabandham*) brought the Truth in a crystal clear fashion for even the common man to understand in his own vernacular.

Their works convey the “Sareera-Sareere-Bhava”(ஸ்ரீர ஸ்ரீர் பாவ) implying that the physical world is the body of the Lord and the Lord represents the life and soul of the physical world.

True knowledge consists in understanding this. This will lead to an awakened understanding of the relationship between the *Jeeva* or the individual soul and the *Paramaatma* which is that of a servant and his beloved Master.

Unlike the *Sruti* (Vedas and the Upanishads) which emphasizes the பரத்வம் (“Transcendental aspect”), the Azhwars emphasize the ஸௌஸீல்ய (*Sausheelya*) “the gracious Condescension” and ஸௌலப்ய (*Saulabhya*) “easy accessibility” of the Lord. That is the reason for their ever-loving hymns on the *archa avataara moorthies* in various holy shrines of the Lord.

The Azhwars are unanimous in pointing out that the Lord is not only the *goal* (புராப்யம்) but also the true *means* (புராபகம்). The true meaning of the

final teaching of Lord Krishna in Geetha comes across so clearly in their verses:

ஸர்வ தர்மான் பரித்யஜ்ய மாமேகம் ஸரணம் வ்ரஜ
“Discarding all other means take me as the sole refuge”.

Surely the sages and the saints like the Azhwars who are immersed in divine love and experience and who reside forever under the feet of the Lord are our true guides to the Lord. Devotion to the devotees of the Lord is described to be one of the faultless ways by Sri Thirumazhisai Piraan.

பழுதாகாதொன்றறிந்தேன் பாற்கடலான் பாதம்
வழுவாவகைநினைந்து வைகல்-தொழுவாரை
கண்டிறைஞ்சிவாழ்வார். 89. *Naanmukan Thiruvandadhi*

The Lord's Paduka பாதுகை (*Paduka*) refers to the sandals of the Lord (what resides under the Lord's holy feet). In the Sri Vaishnava tradition, the *Sataari* which is kept at the Lord's holy feet, bearing the symbols of the Lord's sandals on top of a crown represents, Sri NammAzhwar himself. Sri NammAzhwar was considered the foremost among the Azhwars. One of the other names of Sri NammAzhwar was *Sataari* .

It is for these and other reasons that our Acharyas had installed the Azhwars as our guide posts and made them an integral part of the temple activities so that people could draw enormous inspiration from them as well as directly benefit from their presence and teachings.